

Central Intelligence Agency

25X1



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

21 June 1985

BANGLADESH: Ershad's Prospects [redacted]

25X1

Summary

President Ershad's position in Bangladesh has strengthened over the past year as a result of his recent referendum and election victories over the increasingly fragmented opposition. He has built a political base in rural areas, enabling him to outflank his urban opposition. Ershad will probably also retain the support of the military, the only force capable now of ousting him. Although his fellow officers do not hold him in high regard, they would move against Ershad only if he is unable to maintain law and order or if he appears to be caving in to opposition demands. Ershad is increasingly confident and will probably move to hold national elections and end martial law in the coming year. [redacted]

25X1

* * * * *

25X1

This memorandum was prepared [redacted] of the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 7 June 1985 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, South Asia Division, NESA, on [redacted]

25X1

NESA-M-85-10135

25X1

~~SECRET~~

25X1

BANGLADESH: Ershad's Prospects

25X1

Ershad's Victories

The elections of 16 and 20 May for local sub-district or "Upazilla" chairmen were a victory for Ershad's martial law regime. Unofficial returns show pro-government candidates have so far won 204 chairmanships out of a total of 458. Independent candidates won 100 chairmanships with the remainder divided between opposition parties. The US Embassy reports that voter turnout was only about 20 to 30 percent.

The 458 Upazilla chairmen will provide Ershad with a potentially powerful rural political base that could outflank the urban-based opposition parties. Upazilla chairmen hold much local power, such as the disbursement of development funds and the collection of local taxes. They, in turn, are dependent on the central government in Dhaka for their salaries and operating expenses.

25X1

The national referendum of 21 March, in our view, amounted to another victory for Ershad because he was able to carry it off despite efforts by the opposition to disrupt the polling. He claimed 94 percent of the referendum polling, which asked voters if they wanted the President to stay in office until a civilian government is elected. Although the regime officially reported a 72 percent turnout,

25X1

estimated that no more than 5 percent of all voters participated in the referendum.

25X1

Ershad's Goals

He has already released from house arrest the leaders of the two main opposition parties, Begum Khaled Zia, head of the moderate Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and Sheikh Hasina Wazed, leader of the leftist, pro-Indian Awami League.

25X1

The Bangladeshi ambassador to the United States recently told US officials that Ershad plans to hold parliamentary and presidential elections sometime in October or November of this year and that Ershad will soon meet with opposition leaders to discuss election preparations. Ershad wants the elections to result in his being elected civilian president, thereby legitimizing his rule, according to US Embassy reporting.

25X1

25X1

Opposition Off-Balance

US Embassy reporting indicates that Ershad hopes to create pressures within the opposition to agree to national elections without preconditions, in the hope of further dividing his opponents. Ershad's success in holding the Upazilla elections and the referendum caught the two major opposition movements off-guard. Both the BNP and the Awami League, along with the smaller parties allied with them, were unable to prevent the Upazilla elections or the referendum either through violence or boycotts. They were even unable to prevent party members from running in the Upazillas on a nonparty basis.

25X1

25X1

divisions within the opposition alliance have prevented it from developing strategy and plans for the future.

25X1

25X1

The BNP, and the six smaller parties aligned with it, is also in disarray and split on the question of whether to cooperate with the regime, according to US Embassy reporting. A

25X1

We expect other BNP factions and allied parties to gravitate to Ershad if offered a share of political power.

25X1

25X1

The Military Factor

We believe that the Army supported the Upazilla elections and the referendum out of concern that opposition success in forcing the cancellation of scheduled elections three times humiliated the martial law regime and damaged Bangladesh's international image. Although senior army officers are aware of Ershad's shortcomings as a leader, we judge that most of them are reluctant to take over responsibility for Bangladesh's massive political, social, and economic problems.

25X1

there is no significant dissension among lower-level army officers over Ershad's leadership.

25X1

25X1

25X1

Outlook

We believe Ershad has a fair-to-good chance of holding national elections within the next year and becoming the next elected civilian President. We also expect martial law to be gradually dismantled and ended completely once elections are

25X1

[redacted]

successfully held. Moderate opposition figures likely will participate in any elections if, as we expect, they are guaranteed cabinet or parliamentary seats by the regime. Ershad and his army backers probably will also exclude leftist political parties from positions of real importance. If Ershad were to reverse course and give in to opposition demands for a speedy end to martial law and the release of political prisoners--which is unlikely--the army would probably move to strip him of his job as Army Chief of Staff or even remove him from office altogether.

[redacted]

25X1

Implications for the United States

Whatever the outcome of the current political situation, Bangladesh will probably continue to be ruled by moderate leaders who are friendly to the United States. The strongly anti-communist army would likely try to block any attempt by the leftist Awami League to accede to power.

[redacted]

25X1

In the event of a sharp deterioration in Bangladesh's economic and security situation, US efforts to promote regional stability in South Asia could be hampered. Poverty and population pressures, for example, would likely lead to increased illegal Bangladeshi emigration to India, prompting reprisals by New Delhi. Continued political instability would provide avenues for further subversive efforts by such states as the Soviet Union, Libya, and Iran.

[redacted]

25X1

25X1

ANNEX

Highlights of Ershad's Rule

24 March 1982	Coup led by Lt. General H. M. Ershad ousts civilian government, suspends constitution, dissolves parliament, and abolishes parties. Ershad becomes Chief Martial Law Administrator.
27 March 1982	Justice Abul Fazal Muhammad Ahsanuddin Chaudhury named President by Ershad.
11 December 1983	Chaudhury resigns as president; Ershad assumes Presidency.
27 May 1984	Scheduled date for Presidential and parliamentary elections; opposition-led violence forces cancellation.
8 December 1984	Re-scheduled date for parliamentary elections; mass demonstrations by opposition forces cancellation.
16 December 1984	Ershad re-schedules parliamentary elections for 6 April 1985 and dismantles some martial law offices.
1 March 1985	Ershad announces national referendum for 21 March; referendum replaces parliamentary elections, now cancelled due to opposition boycott. Ershad also reimposes full martial law and bans all political activity.
21 March 1985	National referendum on Ershad's policies held; Ershad declares victory, claiming 94 percent approval.
16 and 20 May 1985	Upazilla, or local, elections are held; pro-regime candidates reportedly win 44 percent of the offices; opposition-led boycott fails.

25X1

25X1

25X1

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH: Ershad's Prospects [REDACTED]

25X1

Internal Distribution:

- 1 - DDI
- 1 - Registry
- 1 - D/NESA
- 1 - DD/NESA
- 1 - NIO/NESA
- 1 - C/PES
- 1 - C/PPS
- 1 - C/SO/D/NESA
- 1 - C/SO/P/NESA
- 1 - C/DDO/NE [REDACTED]
- 1 - C/DDO/NE [REDACTED]
- 1 - CPAS/ISS
- 1 - CPAS Foreign Liaison Staff
- 1 - CPAS Liaison Officer Treasury
- 1 - [REDACTED]
- 1 - PDB Staff
- 4 - CPAS/IMD/CB
- 2 - NESA/PS
- 2 - NESA/SO/P Branch

25X1

25X1

DDI/NESA/SO/S/S/[REDACTED]/21 June 85)

25X1

25X1

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH: Ershad's Prospects

External Distribution:

25X1

Captain Robert G. Anderson, USN
JCS/PPD/FESA, Room 4D973, The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20311

Captain Edward Louis Christensen, USN, Chief, South Asian
Regional Plans and Policy Branch, Department of Defense, Room
2E973, Pentagon, Washington, DC 20301

Mr. Marion Creekmore, Deputy Director, Policy Planning Staff,
Department of State, Room 7312, Washington, DC 20520

Herbert G. Hagerty, Director, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and
Bangladesh, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs,
Department of State, Room 5247, Washington, DC 20520

Mr. James P. Covey, Special Assistant to the President for
National Security Affairs, National Security Council, Near
Eastern and South Asian Affairs, National Security Council,
Old Executive Office Building, Washington, DC 20500

Ms. Nan Kennelly, Desk Officer, Bangladesh, NEA/PAB,
Department of State, Room 5247, Washington, DC 20520

Mr. Robert Peck, Deputy Assistant Secretary, NEA Bureau,
Department of State, Room 6244, Washington, DC 20520

Ms. Tish Butler, Agency for International Development
ANE/ASIA/BI, Room 3319, 320 21st Street, N. W. Washington,
DC 20523

25X1

Mr. Charles W. Greenleaf, Assistant Administrator for Asia and
Near East Bureau, Agency for International Development,
Room 6212, Department of State, Washington, DC 20523

Mr. Ron Lorton, Deputy Director, Bureau of Intelligence and
Research, Near East and South Asia, Room 4636, Department of
State, Washington, DC 20520

Mr. Michael Malinowski, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Near
East and South Asia, Room 4636, Department of State, Washington,
DC 20520

25X1

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH: Ershad's Prospects

25X1

Peter Tomsen, Director, INS, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Department of State, Room 5251, Washington, DC 20302

Darnell Whitt, Intelligence Adviser to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Room 3E228, Pentagon, Washington, DC 20301

Dr. Dov S. Zakheim, Assistant Under Secretary for Policy Resources, Room 3D777, Department of Defense, Washington, DC 20301

Mr. Ronald P. Zwart, Special Assistant for South Asia, International Security Affairs, Near Eastern-South Asia Region Department of Defense, Room 4D765, Pentagon, Washington, DC 20301